

By Rep. Tom Rooney (R-Fla.) - 07/29/10 04:56 PM ET

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The Castro regime is in dire financial trouble. The state-run economy is in crisis, foreign trade declined by a third this past year, the tourism industry is declining and the government is several billion dollars in debt to foreign lenders. Meanwhile, Venezuela — where despot Hugo Chavez is usually happy to help out Fidel and Raul Castro — is unable to provide much assistance due to the failings of its own communist rule.

Emboldened by these developments, Cuba's dissidents have grown increasingly active, sensing change is finally imminent.

The Castros, not ones to go down easily, have responded by desperately seeking new sources of revenue to keep their floundering regime alive. They are hoping to land the big prize — an easing of sanctions by the United States. This would provide the hard currency they need to continue their evil, authoritarian rule.

Unfortunately, on June 30 the House Agriculture Committee played right into the Castros' hands, approving a bill that would lift the travel ban on Cuba and bolster the Castro regime with American tourism dollars.

Why would we lift the travel ban now and let our tourism dollars prop up the Castro regime? Lifting the ban while this regime is on the ropes would just be another bailout — only this time, we'd be bailing out a brutal dictatorship on the brink of collapsing. Every dollar spent by American tourists in Cuba would help the regime's bottom line, providing the Castros with the resources they need to maintain their army, secret police and political prisons.

According to the State Department, Cuba is a state sponsor of terrorism with close ties to Iran and North Korea. The country also provides a safe haven for terrorists from around the world. Lifting the travel ban would funnel American tourism dollars to finance state-sponsored terror and help provide refuge to terrorists, jeopardizing our national security. As a congressman from Florida, I cannot in good conscience support any bill that lets American dollars provide refuge

for terrorists 90 miles from the shores of our state.

Shockingly, this bill requires no human-rights concessions from Cuba. The proposal rewards the Castros for decades of human-rights abuses, and it opens relations with a regime that routinely imprisons citizens and journalists who disagree with their government. This bill is a symbolic abandonment of our commitment to the brave pro-democracy movement in Cuba.

According to democracy advocate Freedom House, Cuba holds at least 167 political prisoners. Just a few months ago, political prisoner Orlando Zapata Tamayo died after a hunger strike. And today, American citizen Alan Gross is being held prisoner without charges for his efforts to help the small Jewish community in Cuba use cell phones and laptops.

Supporters of this bill claim allowing American tourists into Cuba would weaken the regime. History does not support this claim. European, Canadian and Latin American visitors have been visiting the island regularly since the 1990s. While these visits have brought money to support the government, they have done nothing to undermine Castro or improve the lives of Cuban people. In fact, not only has the influx of European and Canadian tourists failed to bring greater freedom to Cuba, the tourism industry has instead become a tool for the Castro regime to expand its control over the Cuban people.

The Castros have used their control over the tourism industry to create a national system of apartheid and segregation. They forbid Cuban citizens from entering the hotels, resorts, beaches, restaurants and stores where foreign tourists visit. The government sharply limits the interactions tourists can have with the Cuban people. The State Department warns against interacting with Cuban citizens, because any interaction could be monitored by the secret police and can subject that citizen to harassment, detention or other repressive actions. The Castro-run tourism industry abuses the most innocent and defenseless of its population by openly promoting child prostitution.

There is no evidence to suggest liberalizing our travel policies with Cuba would fare any better than the efforts made by Europe or Canada.

Ultimately, we have a choice. We can strengthen the pressure on the Castro regime and help bring about a post-Castro government prepared to leave communism behind. Or we can lift

sanctions, give the Communist party the means to persist and legitimize their horrible treatment of the Cuban people over the last 50 years.

I support sending a clear message to the next generation of Cuban leaders after the Castros: They can maintain a defeated evil regime, or be welcomed as a free nation with the United States as partner.

*Rep. Rooney serves on the House Agriculture and Armed Services Committees.*